

A HANDFUL OF HEROES

Five short stories selected by
Herbert Harris
with The Editors of Reader's Digest

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A HANDFUL OF HEROES

The detectives of Scotland Yard have inspired many fictional heroes. Here are five of the most famous, each featured in one of his creator's most successful short stories

<i>Superintendent French in</i> THE SUITCASE by Freeman Wills Crofts	Page 5
<i>Chief Inspector West in</i> THE GREYLING CRESCENT TRAGEDY by John Creasey	15
<i>Commissioner Appleby in</i> THE SPENDLOVE PAPERS by Michael Innes	Page 39
<i>Detective Chief Inspector Petrella in</i> A THOROUGHLY NICE BOY by Michael Gilbert	Page 44
<i>Commander Gideon in</i> THE MAN WHO LOVED CARS by J. J. Marric	Page 57

Superintendent French in

THE SUITCASE

by Freeman Wills Crofts



ALBERT RANK SHIVERED in the chill wind which was blowing along the platform of Thorpe Station on this late October afternoon.

Wearing an old waterproof and carrying a small suitcase, he shrank behind a stack of luggage. He wished to avoid notice, for he was on a terrible errand—no less than the murder of his enemy, David Turner.

Rank was porter, boots and factotum in a small hotel in North London. In desperate straits from gambling losses, he had attempted to repair his fortunes by a raid on the till of a small shop. The old proprietor had seized him, and to escape he had hit him. The man fell, striking his head on a step. Next day Rank learned from the papers that he was dead.

That was not all. David Turner had seen him leave the shop and had put two and two together. Half the swag and two pounds a week out of Rank's small wages was Turner's price. "I told the police I recognized your face but couldn't place you," he declared. "I can remember who you are at any time and then it'll be you for the eight-o'clock walk." Rank knew that it was true and shivered.

He paid up, but he brooded over the situation. While Turner lived he would know neither safety nor happiness. The thought of the man's death became an obsession.

Almost unconsciously a plan formed in his mind. Turner was

a passenger guard on the railway. Rank would get him alone in his van. And then—

It was for this purpose that, with a heavy cosh hidden under his clothes, he was now awaiting the London train. At five thirty to the minute it came in. From previous inspection he had learnt that the dining car was the sixth from the rear, and that the five coaches between it and the van were of the side-corridor type, with luggage shelves and lavatories at their ends. He also knew that only one guard was in charge his enemy, David Turner.

Unostentatiously mingling with the crowd, Rank approached the train. He was the last to get into the coach immediately behind the dining car. There he placed his suitcase on one of the shelves, got out again, and strolled along the platform to the last coach. He climbed in, quietly entered the lavatory beside the van and bolted the door, having gripped the handles in his handkerchief. A few seconds later the train started.

From Thorpe to Selcaster, the next stop and for which he held a third-class single, was an hour's run. During it he had counted on the corridor being clear, for at this time of year the train was seldom crowded, and the first dinner was not served till after Selcaster.

At zero hour he left the lavatory and passed through the swaying vestibule into the van. When Turner saw him he jumped up.

"Good Lord, Rank! What's the ruddy idea?"

"Just a word with you, Turner."

"Not here. If you're seen I'll get it in the neck."

"I'll not be a minute. See, I've got a scheme with money in it, but it would take two to get it. Will you join me?"

Turner could not resist this opening. He hesitated and Rank drew a paper from his pocket. It bore an imaginary plan "House, full of valuables and empty. Not overlooked. See, here's a sketch."

As Turner grudgingly bent forward to examine the paper, Rank struck. Turner pitched forward and lay motionless.

The sweat was running in great drops down Rank's forehead as he straightened up and put away his cosh. Now he was in real danger. If a passenger came into the van, he was as good as hanged. He felt an overwhelming urge to rush from the place.

He fought it down. Failure to stick to his plan would mean certain disaster. He must not travel in that near lavatory, for at Selcaster porters would be grouped where the van stopped, and he might be seen leaving. Therefore he must pass unnoticed along the corridor. He had worked out how this was to be done.

He slipped the sketch into his pocket and drew on a pair of rubber gloves. Then, setting his teeth, he knelt down and began to strip the uniform off the body. He found it harder than he had expected. Indeed he grew panicky—it took so long. But at last it was done. Quickly he put on the uniform over his own clothes, coat and all. This was why he had shivered in a feather-weight waterproof. Owing to Turner's being about his height, but of sturdier build, the uniform fitted reasonably well. Indeed it was this fact of their relative sizes that had suggested his plan. With rubber pads in his cheeks and the peak of the uniform cap pulled low over his eyes, he was satisfied no one would recognize him, specially in the dimly lit corridor.

One other precaution remained to be taken. Before leaving the van he made a space in a pile of luggage, dragged the body in, and covered it with suitcases. Discovery of the crime at Selcaster was inevitable, but not, he hoped, till he had left the station.

Having glanced quickly round to make sure he had forgotten nothing, he left the van and, summoning all his strength of will, walked in a leisurely yet businesslike way down the corridor. To his relief he met no one. At last he reached the end of the fifth coach and drew the door to behind him. He was now in the little space containing the luggage shelves, the lavatory, and the vest-

ibule leading to the dining car. Picking up his suitcase, he went into the lavatory. As he bolted the door some of his anxiety dropped away from him. The worst was now over and so far all had gone well.

The suitcase contained his overcoat and a hat. Having taken these out, he stripped off the guard's uniform and his rubber gloves, and together with the cosh, cap and waterproof, packed them in the case. His plan required it to be weighted, but the weight must not take up much room. He had found the very thing in an old cast-iron door from the front of the patent stove in the hall of his hotel. This door, which had been renewed because its enamel had been burnt off, had been left beside the rubbish bin for the dustmen to take away. Rank had protected himself here, too. If its absence were noticed, it would naturally be assumed that the men had taken it.

At last the train began to slacken speed and presently drew in to the platform at Selcaster. Rank stepped out and walked off, neither dawdling nor hurrying. He reached the exit in the middle of a throng of others, handed up his ticket, and left the station. A sigh of relief burst from him. Now he was practically safe. One further precaution and he would be absolutely so.

He knew Selcaster; in fact he had prospected it for the purpose of this very expedition. He turned along the river and soon reached a suburban area and an outlying bridge. Though the wind had fallen, it remained cold and raw and there were few people on the roads. Rank passed onto the bridge, which was deserted. Halfway across he took a cord from his pocket, put it through the handle of the suitcase, and lowered the latter from the parapet. When it reached the water he let go one end of the cord and the suitcase sank without splash or sound. Returning to the centre of the town, he boarded a bus to Wrexborough, a town some fifteen miles along the railway to the south. There he walked about till the next train left for London. He took a single ticket and joined it without incident.

As he sat in his third-class compartment he went over what he had done. Yes, he was safe! He had left absolutely no clue whatever. No detective officer, no matter how skilful and gifted, could possibly trace him. No one knew of his association with Turner, and the girl in the shop had not seen his face. Nothing could connect him with either crime.

In the subsidiary matters apart from the actual murder he had been equally circumspect. The suitcase, cap and waterproof he had bought in different shops in the East End while wearing a disguise.

For his whole day's absence from London he had an adequate explanation. He had gone to his birthplace, Notfield, and had there spent the day visiting hotel after hotel, asking what chances there were of a job. The reason he would give would be that his gambling debts were making life unpleasant in London, and he was considering a fresh start elsewhere. The Notfield hotel proprietors would confirm his statement, and it was unlikely that he had been noticed on the bus from Notfield to Thorpe, an hour's run taken in the late afternoon to enable him to join Turner's train.

At nine-fifty-five the train drew into King's Cross. If challenged, Rank would say he had come direct from Notfield, arriving at St. Pancras at ten-ten. To support this theory he walked to St. Pancras, returning home normally after the ten-ten came in. When he had registered the time of his arrival by asking his landlady for a bite of supper, he felt that his worries at long last were over.

RANK HAD PITTED himself against society, but, unhappily for him, society in this instance was represented by Superintendent French of New Scotland Yard. For French the case began with a telephone message from the Chief Constable of Selcaster, recounting the facts and saying that, as Guard Turner was a Londoner, he had decided to hand over to the Yard. "Our

Inspector Cutler," he concluded, "is travelling up in the train and should be with you about nine."

In due course Cutler was announced. "Ah, Inspector, sit down," French greeted him. "You've had a spot of trouble in Selcaster?"

Cutler agreed, saying that he had been instructed to make inquiries in the train, which had started as soon as they had got another guard.

French nodded. "Tell me what you did."

Cutler had begun by interviewing the dining-car staff. They were positive that no one had passed through the car since leaving Thorpe. Therefore the criminal's activities had been confined to the coaches following. A search of these revealing nothing helpful, Cutler had gone through the compartments, questioning passengers and taking their names. By the time this was done they were approaching King's Cross

Several passengers had noticed that during the run a guard had walked forward along the corridor, but no one had observed him returning. The man indeed had vanished. It was further established that no traveller had been absent from his compartment for more than two or three minutes.

"A pretty problem," said French "Well, Inspector, you've got your work cut out for you. Meantime, we'll look into it from this end "

French was as good as his word During the next day or two discreet inquiries brought out a number of facts. The dead guard had lived quietly in lodgings. He had been rather unsociable, had had a doubtful reputation where money was concerned, and on the whole was not popular. But there was nothing to indicate that he had had a serious enemy.

Selcaster reported that a search for the uniform had proved fruitless. It had not been thrown out of the train nor hidden on the railway premises, nor had anyone been seen wearing it.

French had put Inspector Ludlow in charge of the London

inquiry and now the two men sat talking it over. "As Turner was the only guard in the train," French was saying, "and as his uniform has vanished, it follows that the man seen walking down the corridor was wearing the uniform, and was therefore the murderer."

"Clear enough, sir."

"Something arises out of that, surely? The murderer was somewhere near Turner's height and of slighter build, else he couldn't have got the uniform on over his clothes "

Ludlow slapped his thigh. "That's good, sir! It hadn't occurred to me."

"Another point," continued French. "The murderer left the train at Selcaster. We know that because there was no one in the lavatories or corridor and no stranger entered a compartment during the journey "

"O.K , sir."

"As the uniform was not in the train, the murderer must have taken it with him But he wasn't wearing it, and as he couldn't carry it over his arm, he must have packed it in something What would he use?"

They agreed that of all receptacles a suitcase was the most likely So French reached the first milepost on the road to a completed case

"A step further," he went on. "Imagine yourself guilty of the murder and carrying that uniform about with you. Would you feel happy?"

"I'd feel happier with a can of nitro-glycerine," grinned Ludlow.

"That's it. If it's found, you hang. So you'd get rid of it, at once, there in Selcaster. No waiting till you got to London. Spot of work for the Selcaster men "

French rang up the Selcaster chief constable.

"We've already had your hint about that, Mr French, for which I'm grateful," was the reply. "We're going into it

thoroughly We've offered a good reward and that will ensure that we get it if it's found. We're examining areas closed to the public."

"If I may suggest it, what about rubbish tips?"

"We're having all loose places dug over."

"The river?"

"There are a few places he could have dropped it in unseen: a length of wharf, two bridges, and so on. We're having them dragged."

French felt that he himself could have done no more. "Splendid!" he congratulated. "If it's there you'll get it."

The prophecy was soon fulfilled. Dragging operations were successful and when French reached the Yard two mornings later he found the suitcase waiting for him. Accompanying it was a note saying that the discovery had been kept absolutely secret.

The second milepost!

The inquiry now took a different turn. French entrusted the suitcase, the waterproof and cap, the cosh and the stove door to different officers. The first four drew blanks, but under French's direction the fifth made progress.

A list was obtained from the makers of the stove of all similar doors sent out as replacements during recent weeks, and Ludlow went round the London purchasers. In due course he visited Rank's hotel, and there the proprietress identified the door from the shape of the bare patch. When Ludlow found that the porter was of about Turner's height, but of slighter build, that for some time he had seemed very worried, and that he had leave on the day of the murder, he felt a satisfying thrill. Leaving a man to shadow Rank, he hurried back to the Yard.

"Good work," said French. "He's our man right enough, but we must have more proof. He'll put up some alibi for the day of the crime and we'll get him over that. Bring him in."

So the third milepost came and went.

SINCE THE MURDERS Rank had been living through a veritable nightmare. Added to the gnawing worry of his debts was now the shadow of a ceaseless fear. Every caller at the hotel, every policeman he met, set his heart racing and his hands trembling. Like so many before him, he felt that there was nothing he would not give to call back the past. The thought added to his despair.

When one day he entered the hotel to find two large men waiting for him a cold weight of dread settled down on him. But they were polite, even friendly. Admitting that they were police officers, they said they thought he might be able to help them in an inquiry they were making. Would he have any objection to coming to see Superintendent French, who was handling the matter?

During the silent drive Rank called up his reserves of courage. He had a perfect alibi. All he had to do was to steel his nerves and stick to his story

French's beginning made the former difficult. In a serious voice he told him that the inquiry was concerned with the death of David Turner and that he needn't answer any question unless he liked

Then he went on: "We understand that you were absent from work on the day of the crime. Would you care to tell us where you were?"

Rank breathed more freely. He was prepared for this and his answer was true, except in respect of the time between four and eight. During this period he explained that he had had supper in a café in Notfield and then walked about, revisiting the scenes of his youth.

It seemed to go down well. French nodded, then turned to an incomprehensible sideline. "Looking for a job at Notfield? I don't follow. If you had got one did you mean to remain on there, without any explanation to your old employer?"

Rank didn't understand it, but he drove himself to reply

promptly: "Certainly not. I'd have gone back and worked my notice."

French nodded again "You mean you didn't intend to stay overnight?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why," French said quietly, "did you take that with you."

As he spoke he pointed across the room, and there, suddenly pushed forward into view, was the suitcase. Rank stared at it, frozen with horror. Beneath its stained cover he seemed to see the shadowy outlines of a cosh and a uniform. Slowly he pitched forward in a faint.

Chief Inspector West in
THE GREYLING CRESCENT
TRAGEDY

by John Creasey



THE CHILD lay listening to the raised, angry voices. He was a little frightened, because he had never heard his mother and father quarrel so.

Quarrel, yes, but nothing like this. Nor had he known such silence or such awkward handling from his mother while he had been washed and put to bed.

He was seven—a babyish rather than a boyish seven.

He could hear them in the next room—now his father, shouting, next his mother shouting back. Once she screamed out words he understood, but most of the time there was harsh shrillness or the rough, hard tones of his father.

He had not known that they could make such noise, for they were gentle people.

The child lay fighting sleep, and fearful, longing for a gleam of light to break the darkness, or for a sound at the door to herald their coming; but there was no relief for him that way.

There was relief of a kind.

The voices stilled, and the child almost held his breath, not wanting to hear the ugly sounds again. He did not. He heard the sharp slam of a door, and after that, his mother crying.

Crying.

Soon sleep came over the child in great soothing waves which he could not resist. The darkness lost its terror, the longing for the door to open faded away into oblivion . .

USUALLY THE CHILD woke first in this household, and waking was gentle and welcome. This morning was no different. There was spring's early morning light, bright yet not glaring, for it was early and the morning sun did not shine into this room. But there was the garden, the lawn he could play on, the red metal swing, the wide flowerbed along one side, the vegetable garden at the far end, rows of green soldiers in dark, freshly turned soil.

He stared from his bed, which was near the window, seeing all this and staring pensively at the heads of several daffodils which he had plucked yesterday. He frowned, as if in an effort of recollection, then turned his attention to the small gilt clock on the mantelpiece. When the hands pointed to half-past six, he was allowed to get up and play quietly; at seven, if neither his mother nor his father had been in to see him, he could go and wake them.

The position of the clock's hands puzzled him. He could not tell the time properly, but had learned these hours of great importance: half-past six, seven.

The position of the hands was not near either, and that disappointed him. He had a book, much thumbed, by the bed, and began to look at the familiar pictures of animals, and to puzzle and stumble over the unfamiliar words. In a cooing voice he read to himself in this way, until abruptly he looked at the clock again.

The hands were in exactly the same position as before.

Obviously this was wrong. He studied them earnestly, and then raised his head, as if with a new, cheering thought. A smile brightened his eyes and softened his mouth and he said, "Why, it's stopped."

He got out of bed and went to the window, his jersey pyjamas rucked up about one leg and exposing part of his little round belly. He pressed his nose against the window and for a few minutes his attention was distracted by starlings, sparrows and

thrushes. One starling was pecking at a worm, quite absorbing to the boy, until his attention was distracted by a fly which began to buzz against the inside of the window. He slapped at it with his pink hand, and every time it flew off, he gave the happy chuckle of the carefree

Suddenly he pivoted round and looked at the clock. Birds, fly and joy forgotten, he pattered swiftly to the door. He opened it cautiously and softly onto the small living room

All the familiar things were there.

He looked at the clock on the wall and was obviously astonished, for the hands pointed to half-past seven—certainly later than his training had taught the need for quiet. Eagerly, he crossed to his parents' room, and opened the door.

Silence greeted him

His mother lay on her back in bed, with her eyes closed.

The bedclothes were drawn high beneath her chin, and her arms were underneath the clothes. There were other unusual features about the room, which he saw with a child's eyes, but did not think about.

His father was not by his mother's side.

He went to the bed and called, "Mummy."

His mother did not stir. He called her again, then again and again, and when she took no notice, he touched her face, her cold, cold face, not wondering why it was so cold.

"Mummy."

"Mummy, Mummy, Mummy."

It was no use, and soon he gave up, not knowing what to do

FOR CHIEF INSPECTOR ROGER WEST of New Scotland Yard it was a normal morning. There was too much to do, but like the rest of the Criminal Investigation Department's staff, he was used to that, and dealt with each report, each query, and each memo with complete detachment. He was between cases,

having just prepared a serious one for the Director of Public Prosecutions. Whenever he took his mind off the documents on his desk, he wondered what he would have to tackle next.

A messenger came into the large office which Roger shared with four other chief inspectors, but where he was now alone

"Mr. Cortland would like a word with you, sir."

"Right." Roger got up at once, to go along to Superintendent Cortland's office. This would be the job.

It was.

"Looks pretty well cut and dried," said the massive dark-haired, ageing Cortland, sixty to Roger's forty. "Woman found strangled, out at Putney. When a milkman called, a child opened the door and said he couldn't wake his mother. As it was after ten, the milkman went to find out why. The child's with a neighbour now. The family's name is Pirro, an Italian name, and here's the address—29 Greyling Crescent. It's the end house or bungalow, fairly new—but you'll soon know all about it. Better go to Division first, they'll fix anything you want. Let me know if you need help from me."

"Thanks," said Roger, and went out, brisk and alert. He collected his case from his office and hurried down to his car.

It was then a little after eleven o'clock.

An hour later he approached the bungalow in Greyling Crescent, with misgivings which always came whenever a case involved a child. Most policemen felt the same, but partly because his own sons were still young, and partly because in his early Scotland Yard days he had been in charge of a case which had been particularly savage on a boy, he was acutely sensitive.

He had learned a little more about the Pirro child from Divisional officers, who were only too glad to hand the inquiry over to a Yard man. No one put it into so many words, but it was apparent that everyone saw this as a clear-cut job: husband-and-wife quarrel, murder, flight.

From the Divisional Headquarters Roger had telephoned

Cortland, asking him to put out a call for Pirro who might, of course, be at his daily job in a City office. He was an accountant with a small firm of general merchants.

The bungalow was dull—four walls, square windows which looked as if they had been sawed out of reddish-brown bricks, brown tiles, and drab brown paint. It had been dumped down on a piece of wasteland, and the nearest neighbouring houses were fifty years old, tall, grey, and drab

But the front garden transformed the bungalow.

In the centre a small lawn was as trim and neat as a billiard table. About this were beds of flowers, each a segment of a circle, alternating clustered daffodils, wallflowers bushy and bright as azaleas, and polyanthus so large and full of bloom that Roger had to look twice to make sure what they were.

Two police cars, two uniformed policemen and about twenty neighbours were near the front door. Roger nodded and half smiled at the policeman as he went in, and was greeted just inside the door by Moss, of the Division, an old friend and an elderly, cautious detective.

"Picked up Pirro yet?" Moss asked, in a voice which did not reach the street. His grin meant "Buck up, you Yard slow-coaches "

"Sure you want him?" asked Roger

"Oh, we want him "

"Seen in the act of murder, was he?"

"Damned nearly "

"Who by?"

"A neighbour," Moss said. "The child's with her now. For once we've got a woman who doesn't get into a flap because we're around." Moss was leading the way to an open door, beyond which men were moving and shadows appearing to the accompaniment of quiet sounds. "She was taking her dog for a walk last night, nine-ish, and heard Pirro and his wife at it Says she's never heard a row like it."

"I'll have a word with her later," Roger said. "How about the boy?"

Moss shrugged, and drew attention to his thick, broad shoulders.

"Doesn't realize what's happened, of course, and thinks his mother's still asleep. Not much of a future for him, I gather. No known relatives. Pirro's an Italian by birth—the neighbours don't know much about his background. The dead woman once told the neighbour she lost her parents years ago, and she was an only child."

"Found any documents?" Roger asked.

"A few. Not much to write home about," Moss said. "Ordinary enough couple, I'd say. Furniture bought on instalments, monthly payments made regularly. Birth certificates for the mother and child, naturalization papers for Pirro, death certificates for Mrs. Pirro's parents; the dead woman's maiden name was Margent—Evelyn Ethel Margent. Age twenty-seven."

Moss looked at West as if puzzled, for West had made no move to go into the room of quietly busy men. "There's a family photograph over there, taken this year, I'd say. The kid looks about the same."

The photograph was a studio one, in sepia, and the parents and child were all a little set—posed too stiffly. The woman was pleasant to look at, the man had a dark handsomeness; she looked as English as he looked Southern European.

The child, unexpectedly, was nothing like either. He had a plain, round face, with a much bigger head, proportionately, than either the man or the woman, big startled eyes, and very thin arms; their legs weren't in the picture.

"Did you say you'd seen the child's birth certificate?" Roger asked.

"Yes."

"All normal?"

"Take a look and see."

There it was: father, Anthony Pirro, mother Evelyn Ethel, date—

“What’s the date on the marriage certificate?” Roger asked, and Moss handed the certificate to him. “Thanks. 7th February, 1950, and the child was born 1st October, 1950.”

“Must have got married for love anyway,” Moss said. “They couldn’t have known for sure the kid was on the way when they got spliced.”

“No. Let’s have a look around,” Roger said, and still kept out of the bedroom.

He went into each small room and the kitchen, and everything was spick and span except for the morning’s dust. The furniture was good for a small suburban house, and in excellent taste. Here was a home that was loved, where happiness should live.

At last Roger pushed the door of the bedroom wider open

Death had not spoiled Mrs. Pirro’s pleasant face, except for the dark, brownny bruises at her throat. A police surgeon was there, waiting—Dr. Sturgeon, whom Roger knew well, with photographers and a fingerprint man.

“Hello, Handsome,” Sturgeon greeted.

“Hello, Dick. How are things?”

“About what they seem, I’d say. Tell you better when I’ve done the p.m.”

“When did she die?”

Sturgeon pursed and puckered his full lips.

“Something between eight o’clock last night and midnight.”

“Playing safe, aren’t you?” Roger commented dryly, and studied the woman’s pale, untroubled face. He was hardened to the sight of death, in the young as well as the old, yet Evelyn Pirro stirred him to deep pity. Add the bright gaiety of life to her features and one could see a kind of beauty.

“Any other injuries?” Roger asked.

“None that I’ve noticed yet.”

"General condition?"

"Excellent."

"Any sign of another child?"

"No. You're a rum 'un," Sturgeon added thoughtfully. "What put that into your head?"

"Go and have a look at the family photograph in the next room and also have a look round," Roger advised. "That might give you some ideas. Then you'd better take her away. Photographs finished?" he asked the youthful, red-faced photographer who had been standing by.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Fingerprints got anything?" Roger asked a tall and sallow man who had a little dank grey hair.

"Three sets," this man replied promptly, and nodded at the bed. "Hers, another set probably a man's, and the child's."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Forced entry, or anything like that?"

"I've checked the windows and doors," Moss answered.

"Thanks," said Roger.

"What I want to know is, why did it happen," Moss said suddenly. "Look at the house and the way it's kept. What makes a man come home and kill his wife and run out on his kid?"

"You couldn't be more right on that score—we want the motive as badly as we want Pirro," Roger agreed, almost sententiously. "Something set off this eruption, and that cause is the real killer."

The morning sun caught his face and hair as he stood by the window looking out onto the back garden. There the lawn was less trim than that at the front, obviously because the child had been allowed to play on it. There were bare dirt patches beneath a metal swing which showed bright red in the bright light.

Roger studied all this and considered the evidence of what he had seen and heard, only vaguely aware that Moss, Sturgeon

and the others had taken time to study him. He looked strikingly handsome, with his fair, wavy hair, and his features set and grim, as if something of this tragedy touched him personally.

Then he caught sight of a movement in a garden beyond a patch of scarlet, and soon a woman, calling, "Tony, Tony!"

But she was too late, for a child in a red jersey had started to climb a wooden fence, the stakes of which were several inches apart, nimble and sure-footed. The woman hurried after him, tall, pleasant-faced, anxious. "Tony, don't fall!"

"I won't fall," the boy said clearly, as Roger opened the French windows and stepped outside.

Sight of him achieved what the woman had failed to, and the child stopped. The sun touched him on one side and made his hair look silky and bright, his fair, round face was puzzled. One long leg was this side of the fence and he held on to the top firmly with both small hands.

The neighbour caught up with him.

"Who is that man?" the boy demanded firmly. "Is it a doctor?"

"Tony, please . . ."

"Is it a doctor come to wake Mummy up?"

So they still had not told the child the truth.

Roger felt quite sure that they should, soon. It was false kindness not to, and it would probably shock and surprise soft-hearted people to find out how calmly the child would take the news. Seven was a strangely impersonal age, when such hurts could be absorbed without outward sign of injury.

"I'll tell you when the doctor comes," the woman promised. "You must come in now."

She was nice. Fifty-ish, with dark hair turning grey, a full figure, a navy blue dress. Her hand was firm on the child's thin shoulder, and he turned away from Roger and climbed down.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not a doctor," Roger said, and won a grave scrutiny.

Then Moss called out quietly from the French windows.

"I'll have to go," Roger went on gravely. "Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye, sir," the child said, and Roger turned away thoughtfully and went to Moss.

"What's on?"

"We've just had a flash from the Yard—a message from Keeling and Keeling, Pirro's office."

"What?"

"He hasn't turned up this morning."

"Right," said Roger "I'll come and talk to the Yard."

He moved swiftly, suddenly decisive, and the sight of the stretcher being pushed into the ambulance did not make him pause.

He slid into his own car, noticing that the crowd had swollen to forty or fifty. Windows were open at the drab houses and women stood at their front doors, all looking this way.

Roger flicked on his radio, and when the Yard Information Room answered, he said, "Give me Mr. Cortland."

A small car swung into the crescent, stopped abruptly and two men got out—newspapermen, one with a camera. Roger watched them as he waited.

"What are you after, West?" Cortland demanded.

"I'd like the whole works here," Roger said promptly. "Enough men to question all the neighbours and to try to find out exactly what time Pirro left home last night. Quick inquiry at his office, too, to find out if he's been nervy lately. Check on any boy friends his wife might have had just before they married and whether any old flame has come on the scene again lately. How about it?"

"Take what men you need, but release 'em as soon as you can." Cortland was almost curt.

"Thanks," said Roger.

Soon it was all on the move. Detectives from the Yard and the Division swarmed the crescent; neighbour after neighbour was

questioned; statement after statement was made and written down.

Roger himself went to see the neighbour who was looking after the boy, and heard her story first-hand; it was simple enough and exactly what Moss had already told him. The woman, a Mrs. Frost, was calm and obviously capable; frank, too.

"I'll gladly look after the boy for a few days, but I don't know what's likely to happen after that," she said. "Mrs. Pirro had often told me she had no relations."

"And her husband?"

"She knew of none, anyhow."

"Did they often quarrel, Mrs. Frost?" Roger asked without warning.

"I've never known a more contented couple and I've seldom heard a wry word," she said. "It was almost too good to be true. They both doted on Tony, too."

"Has anything unusual happened recently?"

Mrs. Frost, the nice woman, hesitated as if she didn't quite know how to answer; but Roger did not need to prompt her.

"Not really, except one thing, and I feel beastly even mentioning it, but she had a visitor yesterday morning. Tony was at school, of course. I saw a man drive up in a small car and go in, and —" Mrs. Frost paused, but set confusion quickly aside. "I daresay you'll think I'm being catty, but I was surprised. It was a young man, and he was there for at least two hours. He left just before Mrs. Pirro went to fetch Tony from school."

She had never seen the caller before, she answered Roger, and hadn't noticed much about him, except that he was tall and fair. There was no way even of guessing whether the visitor had anything to do with what had happened.

Roger left her, without seeing the child, had a word with Moss, and then went to Keeling and Keeling's offices, in Fenchurch Street. It was the third floor of an old dark building with

an open-sided elevator and an elderly one-armed attendant.

Pirro had not come back.

Pirro had been quite normal all of yesterday, his short, stoutish employer asserted. An exemplary worker. A happy man. In receipt of a good salary. Special friends? No, no confidants here, either. Kept himself to himself. By all means question the staff, if it would help.

There were thirteen members of the staff. Two men seemed to have known Pirro rather better than the others, and the picture of the man became clearer in Roger's mind. Pirro brought sandwiches to lunch every day, went straight home every night, was passionately devoted to his wife, doted on his child.

It was impossible to believe that he had killed his wife, they said. *Impossible*.

Did anyone know where his wife had worked before her marriage?

Of course, at an office on the floor below—Spencer's.

Roger went there, to find a benign-looking, round-headed elderly man who made a living out of selling insurance. Did he remember Evelyn Margent? A *charming* girl, and most capable. Surely no *trouble*? So devoted to her Italian young man. Other boy friends? *We-ell*—was there anything wrong in a boy friend or two before marriage? Surely it was customary, even wise? What girl knew her mind while she was in her teens?

"Mr. Spencer, do you know if Mrs. Pirro had an affair just before her marriage?" Roger was now almost curt, for benignity could be too bland. This man's round head and round face worried him, too; by now Sturgeon would know why.

"As a matter of fact, Chief Inspector, yes, she did. But I insist that it was perfectly normal, and certainly no harm came of it."

"With whom, please?"

Spencer became haughty. "With my son, Chief Inspector."

"Thank you," Roger said. "Have you a photograph of your son here, Mr. Spencer?"

"I really cannot see the purpose of such an inquiry. My son—"

Spencer didn't finish, but lost a little of his blandness, opened a drawer in an old-fashioned desk, and took out several photographs: of a woman and a boy, the woman and a youth, the woman and a young man perhaps in his early thirties.

"There is my wife and son, Chief Inspector, at various ages. Take your choice "

Roger studied the photographs impassively. He did not speak for some time, although he already knew exactly what he wanted to ask next. Spencer's son, over the years, was fair-haired and round-faced, and in the photograph of him as a child, he looked remarkably like Tony Pirro.

"Thank you, Mr. Spencer," Roger said at last. "Will you be good enough to tell me where your son is?"

"He should be here at any time," Spencer said, and his own round face was red with an embarrassment, perhaps distress, that he couldn't hide. "He is my partner in business. Why do you want to see him, Chief Inspector?"

"I would like to know whether he has seen Mrs. Pirro recently."

Spencer was now a harassed, resigned man.

"I can tell you that," he said. "Yes, Chief Inspector, he has. It is a long story, an unhappy story. By dismal chance he saw Mrs. Pirro and her son only a few days ago. He—he told me about it. He was in great distress, very great distress. The likeness —"

"Likeness?"

"You are a man of the world, Chief Inspector, and there is no point in beating about the bush. My son and Mrs. Pirro were once on terms of intimacy—her marriage to Pirro came as a great shock. A *great* shock. He did not dream that her child was *his* child, but he told me that once he saw them together, it was beyond all doubt.

"Naturally, he wanted to see his son. He was quite prepared to do so without disturbing Mrs. Pirro's domestic life, but it was more than flesh and blood could stand not to see his own—child. All last evening he talked to me about it. My advice was that he should try to put everything out of his mind, but I doubt if he ever will. It's a great tragedy, there's positively no other word for it."

"Has he seen Mrs. Pirro since that chance encounter?"

"Oh, yes He went there yesterday morning. He—but here is Charles, he can speak for himself "

Charles Spencer came in, and the likeness between him and Mrs. Pirro's son put the identity of the father beyond any reasonable doubt.

"DEAD," echoed Charles Spencer, just two minutes later. "Evelyn *dead*?" He looked from Roger to his father, and back again, as if unbelieving. "But *how*?"

"That's what I'm trying to establish, Mr. Spencer."

"It's fantastic! I can't believe it. She—she didn't give me the slightest indication." The round face was red in this man's own kind of dismay.

"Indication of what, Mr. Spencer?"

"That she would do away with herself! She—she agreed that as I knew about the boy I couldn't be expected to lose sight of him. It's dreadful. It—"

"Mrs. Pirro was murdered, Mr. Spencer."

"Oh, my God," breathed Charles Spencer. "Oh, my God." Then, as if the words were wrung from him, "She said he'd kill her if he ever found out."

ROGER WENT into Cortland's office about six o'clock that evening.

"Still no sign of Pirro," he said abruptly. "Will you give the O.K. to put that call for him all over the country?"

"Can do. What's worrying you?"

"I'd rather he didn't kill himself before we get him," Roger said brusquely. "It could happen. I don't like the case at all—there's something very nasty about it."

"You never were happy until you'd got your man," Cortland said, and telephoned to have the call for Pirro extended. When he rang off he said, "Now, what've you got so far?"

A summary of the investigation took twenty minutes in the telling. Cortland listened attentively and made little comment beyond, "Well, it's all adding up. You've found two neighbours who saw Spencer go there yesterday morning, three who heard last night's quarrel, two who saw Pirro leave just after nine fifteen. Any doubt about that time?"

"No, It was just after a television programme, the neighbours, husband and wife, took their dog for an airing."

"Seems straightforward enough," Cortland said. "We've had a few false reports that Pirro's been seen, but that's all. Seldom went anywhere else, as you know, just a home bird. We've got his history," Cortland went on, and handed over some papers.

Roger scanned them.

Pirro's parents had settled in England shortly before the war; when they died, he was sixteen, and had already spent most of his life in England. There were details about people whom he and his parents had known, and much to show that Pirro had always been regarded as wholly trustworthy. During the war he had worked with the Civil Defence.

"None of the people who knew him then seem to have kept in touch," said Cortland. "But you know pretty well all there is about him since he got married, don't you?"

"Yes," admitted Roger. "We've got an even-tempered, home-loving man, no outside interests, nice wife, apparently thoroughly happy, who comes home one night and is heard shouting and raving, for the first time ever. That morning, the

wife's old lover had appeared and we now know he was the child's father. So—"

"If Mrs. Pirro decided to tell her husband the truth, that could explain what happened," Cortland interrupted "Enough to drive a man of Pirro's kind off his rocker, too, and it's easy to go too far. We'll soon pick him up, and he'll—"

"I hope we don't pick his body out of a river," Roger said gruffly. "I'm trying to think where a man in his position would go in such a crisis. Home wrecked and life wrecked. Where—" He broke off and snapped his fingers "I wonder where they spent their honeymoon."

"Margate, probably," Cortland commented dryly.

"Mrs. Frost would know," said Roger. "I'll have the Division ask her." He saw Cortland's grin at his impatience, but that didn't worry him. All he wanted was an answer, and one soon came: the Pirros had honeymooned in Bournemouth.

It was almost an anticlimax when Pirro was picked up on the cliffs at Bournemouth late that evening.

"All alive, too," Cortland jeered.

"That could be a good thing," Roger said. "Does he know why he's been picked up?"

"No."

"When did he go, has he said?"

"Last night's mail train—ten forty-two from Waterloo. He went to Putney Station, was seen hanging about for twenty minutes or so, caught a train to Waterloo for the ten forty-two to Bournemouth, with a few minutes to spare."

"I see. Mind if I go down to get him?" Roger asked.

"Mind he doesn't give you the slip," Cortland jeered again.

PIRRO WAS smaller than Roger had expected, but even better-looking than in his photograph—a short, compact man with jet-black hair and fine, light blue eyes which made him quite striking. His lips were set and taut and his hands were clenched

as he jumped up from a chair when Roger and a Bournemouth detective entered the room where he was guarded by a uniformed policeman; but he didn't speak.

"Good evening, Mr. Pirro," Roger greeted mildly. "I am Chief Inspector West of New Scotland Yard, and I would like you to answer a few questions "

"Is it not time you answered questions?" Pirro demanded, with restrained anger. "Why am I kept here? Why am I treated as a criminal? I demand an answer."

Was he simply being clever?

His English had a slight trace of an accent, and was a little more precisely uttered than most. He had had a lot of time to think over the situation and might have prepared answers of a kind to every question. The best thing would be to catch him off his guard.

There was only one way—to use shock tactics. Roger used them, roughly, abruptly.

"Anthony Pirro, it is my duty to arrest you in connection with the murder of your wife, Mrs. Evelyn Pirro, at about ten o'clock last night, and I must inform you that anything you say will be written down and may be used in evidence against you "

During the charge Pirro first started violently, then his expression and his whole body seemed to go slack. Then suddenly a new expression came into his eyes. Did he will that expression? Had he carefully and cunningly prepared for this moment of crisis?

His next reaction took both Roger and the Bournemouth man by surprise. He leaped forward as if to attack, snatched at Roger's hands and gripped his wrists tightly.

"You are lying, she is not dead," he said fiercely. "You are lying!" His body quivered, his white teeth clenched, his fingers dug into Roger's wrists.

"You know very well she is dead," Roger said coldly, nodding the Bournemouth man to stand back.

"No!" cried Pirro, as if real horror touched him now "No, she is not dead, she cannot be. I pushed her away from me, that is all. I felt that I hated her, but *dead*—"

It was an hour before he could talk rationally, and much that he said was obviously true. His wife had told him the truth about the child, and in the rage and hurt of the revelation Pirro had wished both her and himself dead; he had raved and damned and cursed her, had struck her and stormed out of their home. But—

"I did not kill her," he said in a hushed voice. "When I came here I knew she remained everything to me. I could not live without her . . .

"I *cannot* live without her," he went on abruptly. "It is not possible." Then calmness took possession of him, as if he knew that further denials were useless and did not really matter.

"The child?" Roger asked.

"He is not mine," said Pirro. "I have no wife and no son."

"WELL, YOU'VE got everything you can expect," Cortland said, next afternoon at the Yard "Motive, opportunity and an admission that he struck her. He could have had a brainstorm and not remember choking the life out of her, but that's neither here nor there. Don't tell me you're not satisfied."

"I'm still not happy about it," Roger said. "Pirro closed up completely when he realized his wife was dead, and behaved as if nothing mattered after that. He hasn't said a word since. We've checked that he caught the ten forty-two from Waterloo to Bournemouth. He seems to have retraced the steps he and his wife took on their honeymoon. They loved each other so much for so long that I feel I must find out exactly what happened to cause all this."

"If he won't talk, who will?" Cortland demanded.

"The child might," Roger said slowly. "I wanted to avoid it but now I'm going to question him."

LITTLE TONY PIRRO looked up into Roger's face, his own grey eyes grave and earnest. He stood by the bungalow, and Roger sat back, a cigarette in his hand, aware that Mrs. Frost was anxious and disapproving in the kitchen, with the door ajar.

Tony had said, "Good morning, sir," with well-learned politeness, and waited until Roger said, "Do you know who I am, Tony?"

"Yes, sir You are a policeman."

"That's right. Do you know why I'm here?"

"Aunt May said you were going to ask me some questions."

"That's right, too. They're important questions."

"I know. They're about my Mummy being ill."

"Yes, she's very ill, you know."

"The doctor said she was going to die," announced Tony, with no inflection in his voice, "but it won't hurt her."

Damn good doctor.

"It won't hurt at all," Roger assured the child. "Did you see her last night?"

"No, I was living here, with Mrs. Frost."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Oh, lots of times."

"Can you remember the very last time?"

"Yes, of course "

"When was it, Tony?"

"Not last night, but the night before that."

"Where were you?" asked Roger, almost awkwardly

"In my bedroom."

Roger's eyes widened as if in surprise.

"Have you a whole bedroom all to yourself?"

"Oh, yes." Tony's eyes lit up and he turned and pointed. "It's over there."

"I'd like to see it," Roger said, and got up. "Will you show me?"

"Oh, yes," said Tony eagerly. "It's a big room and Daddy papered the walls 'specially for my birthday."

He went, hurrying, to open the door into the small room, with Robin Hood motifs on the walls, the bed, even on the toys. He stood proudly, waiting for Roger's look of surprised approval, and also waiting on his words.

"Well!" Roger breathed. "This is wonderful! Robin Hood, too. Look at him! I hope he won't shoot you with his bow and arrow."

"Oh, he won't, he's only a picture," Tony announced, as a statement, not reproof.

"Oh, of course," Roger said, and continued to look round for several minutes before asking, "Did Mummy come in to say goodnight?—the night before last, I mean."

"Yes."

"The way she always does?"

"Yes "

"Was she ill then?"

"No," said Tony thoughtfully. "She wasn't ill, but she wasn't happy like she usually is "

"Oh, what a pity. How do you know?"

"She was crying."

"Did she cry very much?"

"No, only a little bit. She didn't want me to see."

"Did she cry very often?" Roger persisted.

"Well, only sometimes."

"When did she usually cry, Tony?"

"When Daddy was ill," Tony said, very simply. "It was Christmas and Daddy had to see the doctor."

"Did she ever cry when Daddy was well?"

"Oh, no, *never*."

"That's good. When she cried the night before last, was Daddy here?"

"No, Daddy wasn't home then "

"Did you hear him come home?"

"Oh, yes, I always recognize his footsteps, and Mummy does, too."

"Did he come to you and say good night?"

"Yes."

"Was he crying?"

"Oh, Daddy doesn't cry," Tony said with proud emphasis

"He's a man."

"Of course, how silly of me. Was he happy that night?"

"He was happy with me," Tony declared.

"The same as usual?"

"Just the same "

"Was he happy with Mummy?"

"Well, he was at first," Tony said quietly, and then went on without any prompting. "Then he shouted at Mummy, ever so loud. It woke me up, and I listened for ever such a long time Daddy shouted and shouted, and Mummy cried, and then *she* shouted back at him, I didn't like it, so I put my head under the bedclothes."

"That was a good idea. When you took it out again, were they still shouting?"

"Well, yes, they were."

"Both of them?"

"Well, no," said Tony, after a pause "Only Daddy was."

"Did you hear Mummy at all?"

"She was crying again."

"Was she crying very much?"

"Well, quite a lot, really."

"How long did Daddy shout at her?"

"Not long, then. He went out."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I heard him bang the door and then walk along the street. He was going ever so fast."

"Was he by himself?"

"Oh, yes."

"Didn't Mummy go with him?"

"She just cried and cried," Tony said, quite dispassionately. "And then she went all quiet. I thought she'd gone to sleep. I didn't know she was ill."

"Tony," said Roger softly, "I want you to think very carefully about this. Did your Mummy cry *after* your Daddy banged the door?"

"Oh, yes, like I told you."

"Did she cry a lot?"

"Ever such a lot."

"Did she come and see you then?"

"No, she didn't."

"What did happen?"

"I just went to sleep," Tony said, with the same complete detachment, "and when I went to see Mummy in the morning she wouldn't wake up."

"I see," said Roger, and he had to fight to keep from showing his excitement to this child. "Thank you very much for answering my questions so nicely. I'm going away now, but I'll see you again soon."

In the next room he spoke to the sergeant who had been there with a notebook. "Get all that?"

"Every word, sir."

"Fine!" Roger went out of the room as swiftly as a man could move and strode into the street and to his car. This afternoon there were fewer spectators. He slid into his seat and flicked on the radio, and when the Yard answered he asked for Cortland.

Cortland soon came on.

"Seen the Pirro child?" he demanded.

"Yes, we've had a talk," said Roger, "and he's told us a lot we didn't suspect. I'm going over to check Charles Spencer's movements last night. His father's given him an alibi but it might be easy to break."

"Hey, what's all this about?" Cortland demanded

"The child says that his mother cried after Pirro left," Roger said. "If that's true, she was alive when he went out. I'd believe that Pirro would kill his wife in a rage, but not that he'd go out, cool down and come back and kill her in cold blood"

"My God!" breathed Cortland. "All right, get cracking."

The Yard and the Division put every man they could spare on the inquiry. Results weren't long in coming.

Charles Spencer had left his father's Chelsea house at half-past nine on the night of the murder, giving him ample time to get to the Putney bungalow in time to kill Mrs. Pirro. His car had been noticed in a main road near the bungalow. He had been seen walking towards Greyling Crescent. No one had actually seen him enter the bungalow, but he had been seen driving off in the car an hour later.

By the middle of the afternoon that third day Roger saw Charles Spencer at the Fenchurch Street Office—the man so like his son, protesting his innocence mildly at first, then indignantly, then angrily. But eventually he grew frightened, his round face reddening, his big strong hands clenching and unclenching.

"Mr. Spencer, I want to know why you went to see Mrs. Pirro that night, and what happened while you were there," Roger insisted coldly.

"Supposing I did see her for a few minutes—that's no crime! I went to see that she was O.K. She was perfectly well when I left her. Her brute of a husband had run out on her and she was terrified in case he'd come back and do her some harm. He did come back and he strangled her—"

"No, he didn't," Roger said flatly. "He walked to Putney Station, waited twenty minutes for a train to Waterloo, then caught the mail train to Bournemouth, the ten forty-two. He couldn't possibly have had time to go back to the bungalow. Mr. Spencer, why did you kill Mrs. Pirro?"

"DAMN GOOD THING you decided to tackle the child again," Cortland said, on the following day. "How about motive? Made any sense of it yet?"

"It's showing up clearly," Roger told him. "Young Spencer always hated Pirro for taking his mistress away from him. When he discovered the child, all the old resentment boiled up. I doubt if we'll ever know whether he meant to kill Mrs. Pirro; he might have gone there to try to resume the old relationship and hurt Pirro that way. Whatever the motive, we've got him tight."

"Only bad thing left is that kid's future," Cortland said gruffly.

"Pirro's going to see him tonight," Roger said thoughtfully. "A man of his kind of heart-searching honesty can't throw six years away so easily. You get fond of a child in six weeks, let alone six years. I'm really hopeful, anyhow."

"Fine," Cortland said, more heartily. "Now, there's a job out at Peckham—"

Commissioner Appleby in

THE SPENDLOVE PAPERS

by Michael Innes



"TWO NOVELS and a detective story." The vicar's tone was disconsolate, and he set down with every appearance of distaste the three books he had been carrying. "I don't know what our local library is coming to. Again and again I have impressed upon the committee that in biographies and memoirs is to be found an inexhaustible store of edification and pleasure."

"But they keep on ordering fiction, all the same?" Appleby drew a second chair to the fire in the club smoking room. "I agree with you on the pleasure to be had from memoirs, but I'm not so sure about the edification. Consider the case of the Spendlove Papers "

"The Spendlove Papers?" The vicar shook his head as he sat down. "The title seems familiar to me. But I doubt whether I ever set eyes on them."

"You never did. In point of fact, they have remained unpublished. And thereby hangs a tale."

"Splendid!" A man transformed, the vicar gave his library books a shove into further darkness, and beamed happily on the steward who advanced to set down a tea-tray in their place. "Pray let me hear it, my dear fellow."

"Very well. Lord Claud Spendlove never gained the political eminence customary in his family. In state affairs he was much overshadowed by his elder brother, the Marquis of Scattergood, and he never attained more than minor rank in the Cabinet

When it came to social life, however, it was another matter. For more than fifty years Claud Spendlove went everywhere and knew everybody; his persistence in the field of fashion eventually more than made up for any lack of positive brilliance in it; and he had one marked endowment which was never in dispute. Lord Claud was the most malicious man in England."

The vicar looked doubtful. "It may be so, my dear Appleby—although one day you must let me tell you about Archdeacon Stoat. But proceed."

"Moreover, Spendlove was known to be a diarist in a big way, and it was confidently expected that eventually he would put all the masters in the kind—Greville, Creevey, and the rest—wholly in the shade. There was a good deal of speculation as to just how scandalous his revelations would be. Some declared that the book would be so shocking that publication would be impossible for at least fifty years after his death. Others maintained that such a concession to decency was alien to the man's whole cast of mind, and that he would see to it that his memoirs were just printable pretty well as soon as he was in his grave. In the end it appeared that the second opinion was the right one. On his seventy-fifth birthday Spendlove announced that his book was ready for the press and would go to his publisher on the day of his funeral. He had decided to call it *A Candid Chronicle of My Life and Times*."

With a fragment of crumpet poised before him, the vicar shook his head. "It must have had for some an ominous sound."

"Decidedly. And presently Spendlove died. He was staying with his aged brother the Marquis at Benison Court at the time, and there was a quiet country funeral at Benison Parva. I myself knew nothing about all this until, on the following day, an urgent message reached me at New Scotland Yard. Fogg and Gale, the dead man's solicitors, were in a panic. The manuscript of *A Candid Chronicle* had vanished.

"At first, I couldn't see that it was particularly serious. But

they explained that through the length and breadth of England there was scarcely a Family—old Gale enunciated the word with a wonderful emphasis on that capital letter—that might not be outraged and humiliated by some revelation in the book. Spendlove had let himself go from the first page to the last, but had agreed to some arrangement for pretty stiff editing of what would, in fact, be offered to the first generation or two of his readers.

“It became clear to me that the solicitors were right, and that we were facing a real crisis. In the first place, the missing manuscript was a blackmailer’s dream; anyone well up in that line of business could make a large fortune out of its ownership. In the second place, it contained a mass of stuff that could be fed dispersedly into the sensational press without any acknowledgment as to its source. And in the third place, a great many threatened parties must have had a strong motive to get hold of the thing and destroy or suppress it. I travelled down to Benison that night.”

“A beautiful place.” The vicar had shamelessly turned his attention to an *éclair*. “One of the most mellow of the great English houses. I hope that you saw the orangery and the great fountain.”

“My dear vicar, I had other things to think about. For instance, finding a room.”

“Finding a room?”

“I preferred not to stop at Benison Court itself. And the local inn was full.”

“Ah – the tourist season.”

“Not a bit of it. This was in mid-November. So I was rather surprised to see old Lord Whimbrel crouching over a smoky fire in the lounge, and Sir Giles Throstle gossiping in the bar with Sharky Lee.”

“Sharky Lee? What an odd name.”

“Sharky is one of the smartest blackmailers in England.

There were also the Duke and Duchess of Ringouzel, who had been obliged to put up with an attic; and in a yard at the back there was Lady Agatha Oriole, who had arrived with a caravan. I drove on to Benison Magna and then to Abbot's Benison. It was like a monstrous dream. The entire nobility and gentry of these islands, my dear vicar, were encamped round Benison Court—and the only escape from this uncanny social elevation was into the society of an answering abundance of notorious criminals. They had begun to arrive in the district before noon on the day on which *The Times* had announced that Lord Claud Spendlove was sinking. Some of the more resolute of them—mostly members of the peerage—had openly imported house-breaking implements and high explosives. With the usual resourcefulness of their class, they had contacted the charitable organizations for assisting reformed cracksmen, and had taken the most skilled professional advice.”

The vicar looked thoughtful. “Lord Scattergood,” he ventured presently, “must have felt some cause for alarm.”

“I don’t think he did. The Marquis, as I have mentioned, was a very old man; and when I saw him next morning he seemed to have the unruffled confidence that sometimes goes with old age. He took me to his late brother’s sitting room himself, and showed me what had happened. A window giving on a terrace had been forced open, and so had a handsome bureau in the middle of the room. Splintered wood and disordered papers were all over the place, and one capacious drawer was entirely empty. The Spendlove Papers, roughly ordered into *A Candid Chronicle*, had been in that.

“I asked a number of questions – pretty discreetly, for Lord Scattergood had held, as you know, all but the highest office in the realm, and was a person of decidedly august and intimidating presence. He answered with the unflawed courtesy one would expect, and very coherently in the main. If his years showed at all, it was in the way that a certain malice—what one

might call the hitherto suppressed family malice—peeped through the chinks of his great statesman's manner. And he was decidedly frank about his younger brother's proposed book. Claud had never acknowledged the responsibilities proper in a Spendlove; his incursion into the Cabinet had been a fiasco; and while he, the elder brother, had toiled through a long lifetime to sustain the family tradition of public service, Claud had done nothing but amass low scandal in high places, and acquire the ability to adorn and perpetuate it with what was undoubtedly a sufficient literary grace. To this last point Lord Scattergood recurred more than once. But I see, vicar, that you have guessed the end of my story "

The vicar nodded "I think I have None of the folk congregated in those nearby inns had anything to do with the disappearance of *A Candid Chronicle of My Life and Times*. The Marquis of Scattergood had himself staged the burglary, and saved his family's honour by pitching the wretched thing in the fire "

"You are at least halfway to the truth " And Appleby smiled a little grimly. "That night I stopped at Benison Court after all—and did a little burglary of my own. Lord Scattergood, too, had a bureau. I broke it open. The manuscript was there."

"He had preserved it?"

"He had begun to transcribe it. And with a new title-page. *The Intimate Journals of Eustace Scattergood, Fifth Marquis of Scattergood*. It was as a writer that he would have chosen to be remembered, after all."

Detective Chief Inspector Petrella in

A THOROUGHLY NICE BOY

by Michael Gilbert



THE GRANTS LIVED in Kennington. Mr. Grant worked in an architects' office in the City and had inherited the small terrace house in Dodman Street. It was convenient, since he could reach the Bank Station in ten minutes on the Underground. But it was not a neighbourhood which he found really congenial. There was Mr. Knowlson, who worked in insurance and lived two doors up. But most of the inhabitants of Dodman Street were uncouth men, with jobs at one or other of the railway depots, who went to work at five o'clock in the morning and spent their evenings in public houses.

Mr. Grant had often spoken to his wife of moving out to the suburbs, where people went to their offices at a rational hour and spent the evenings in their gardens and joined tennis clubs and formed discussion groups. The factor which tipped the balance against moving was Timothy. Timothy was their only child and was now fourteen, but with his pink and white face and shy smile he could have been taken for twelve. After a difficult start he was happily settled at the Matthew Holder School near the Oval, and sang first treble in the choir of St. Marks.

"It would be a pity to make a change now," said Mrs. Grant. "Timothy's easily upset. I've put his dinner in the oven, I hope he won't be too late back from choir practice. If his dinner gets dried up he can't digest it properly."

At that moment Timothy was walking very slowly down the

road outside St. Marks. He was walking very slowly because, if the truth be told, he had no great desire to get home. When he did get there, his mother would make him take off his shoes and put on a dry pair of socks and would sit him down to eat a large and wholesome meal, which he did not really want, and he would have to tell his father exactly what he had done in school that day and —

A hand smacked him between the shoulder blades and he spun round. Two boys were standing behind him, both a bit older and a lot bigger all round than Timothy. The taller one said, "It's a stick-up, rosebud. Turn out your pockets."

Timothy gaped at him.

"Come on, come on," said the other one. "Do you want to be duffed up?"

"Are you mugging me?"

"You've cottoned on quick, boyo. Shell out."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Timothy. "But I've actually only got about tenpence on me. It's Thursday, you see. I get my pocket money on Friday."

He was feeling in his trouser pocket as he spoke and now fetched out a fivepenny piece, two twopenny pieces and a penny and held them out.

The taller boy stared at the money, but made no move to touch it. He said, "How much pocket money do you get every week?"

"A pound."

"So if we'd stuck you up tomorrow, we'd have got a quid?"

"That's right," said Timothy. "I'm terribly sorry. If you're short tonight I could show you how to make a bit perhaps."

The two boys looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

"Cool," said the tall one. "That's very cool."

"What's the gimmick?" said the second one.

"It's the amusement arcade, in the High Street. There's a big

fruit machine, tucked away in the corner, no one uses it much.”

“Why no one uses that machine is because no one ever makes any money out of it.”

“That’s right,” said Timothy. “It’s a set-safe machine. I read about this in a magazine. It’s a machine that’s organized so that the winning combinations never come up. A man comes and clears the machines on Friday. By this time it must be stuffed with money.”

“So what are you suggesting we do? Break it open with a hammer?”

“What I thought was, it’s plugged into a wall socket. If you pulled out the plug and broke the electric circuit *whilst it’s going* the safety mechanism wouldn’t work. It’d stop at some place it wasn’t meant to stop. You’d have a good chance.”

The two boys looked at each other, and then at Timothy.

He said, “It’d need three people. One to distract the attention of the attendant. You could do that by asking him for change for a pound. The second to work the machine and the third to get down behind and jerk out the plug. I could do that, I’m the smallest.”

The tall boy said, “If it’s as easy as that why haven’t you done it before?”

“Because I haven’t got —” said Timothy and stopped. He realized that what he had nearly said was, “Because I haven’t got two friends.”

“WE’D BETTER GO somewhere and count it,” said Len. Their jacket pockets were bursting with twopenny bits.

“That bouncer,” said Geoff. He could hardly get the words out for laughing. “Poor old sod. He just *knew* something was wrong, didn’t he?”

“He was on the spot,” agreed Len. “He couldn’t very well say that machine’s not meant to pay out. He’d have been lynched. Come on.”

Since the "come on" seemed to include Timothy he followed them. They led the way down a complex of side streets and alleyways, each smaller and dingier than the last, until they came out almost on the foreshore of the Thames. Since the dock had been shut, two years before, it had become an area of desolation, of gaunt buildings with shuttered windows and boarded doorways

Len stopped at one of these and stooped down. Timothy saw that he had shifted a board, leaving plenty of room for a boy to wriggle under. When they were inside and the board had been replaced Geoff clicked on a torch. Stone stairs, deep in fallen plaster and less pleasant litter.

"Our home from home," said Len, "is on the first floor. Mind where you're treading. Here we are. Wait while I light the lamp."

It was a small room. The windows were blanked by iron shutters. The walls, as Timothy saw when the pressure lamp had been lit, were covered with posters. There was a table made of planks laid on trestles, and there were three old wicker chairs. Timothy thought he had never seen anything so snug in the whole of his life

Len said, "You can use the third chair if you like."

It was a formal invitation into brotherhood.

"It used to be Ronnie's chair," said Geoff with a grin "He won't be using it for a bit. Not for twelve months or so. He got nicked for lifting fags. They sent him up the river."

"Your folks going to start wondering where you are?"

"No, that's all right," said Timothy. "I can say I went on to the club after choir practice. It's a church club The vicar runs it."

"Old Amberline? That fat poof."

Timothy considered the Reverend Patrick Amberline carefully and said, "No. He's all right in that way. You have to keep an eye on one of the vergers though."

MR. GRANT SAID, "Timmy seems very busy these days. It's the third night running he's been late."

"He was telling me about it at breakfast this morning," said Mrs. Grant. "It's not only the choir and the boy's club. It's this Voluntary Service Organization he's joined. They're a sort of modern version of the Boy Scouts. They arrange to help people who need help. When he leaves school he might even get a job abroad. In one of those depressed countries."

"Well, I suppose it's all right," said Mr. Grant. "I used to be a Boy Scout myself once. I got a badge for cookery too."

THEY WERE BUSY WEEKS. For Timothy, weeks of simple delight. Never having had any real friends before, he found the friendship of Len and Geoff intoxicating. It was friendship offered, as it is at that age, without reserve. He knew now that Len was Leonard Rhodes and Geoff was Geoffrey Cowell and that Len's father was a market porter and Geoff's worked on the railway. He had enough imagination to visualize a life in which you had to fight for anything you wanted, a life which could be full of surprising adventures.

The first thing he learned about was borrowing cars. This was an exercise carried out with two bits of wire. A strong piece, with a loop at the end, which could be slipped through a gap, forced at the top of the window, and used to jerk up the retaining catch which locked the door. Timothy, who had small hands and was neat and precise in his movements, became particularly skilful at this. The second piece of wire was used by Len, who had once spent some time working in a garage, to start the engine. After that, if no irate owner had appeared, the car could be driven off and would serve as transport for the evening. Timothy was taught to drive. He picked it up very quickly.

"Let her rip," said Geoff. "It's not like you were driving your own car, and got to be careful you don't scratch the paint. With this one a few bumps don't signify."

This was on the occasion when they had borrowed Mr. Knowlson's new Ford Capri Timothy had suggested it. "He's stuck to the television from eight o'clock onwards," he said. "He wouldn't come out if a bomb went off"

The evening runs were not solely pleasure trips. There was a business side to them as well. Len and Geoff had a lot of contacts, friends of Geoff's father, who seemed to have a knack of picking up unwanted packages. A carton containing two dozen new transistor wireless sets might have proved tricky to dispose of. But offered separately to buyers in public houses and cafés and dance halls, they seemed to go like hot cakes. Len and Geoff were adept at this.

The first time they took Timothy into a public house the girl behind the bar looked at him and said, "How old's your kid brother?"

"You wouldn't think it," said Geoff, "but he's twenty-eight. He's a midget. He does a turn in the halls. Don't say anything to him about it. He's sensitive."

The girl said, "You're a bloody liar," but served them with half pints of beer. Mr Grant was a teetotaler and Timothy had never seen beer before at close quarters. He took a sip of it. It tasted indescribable. Like medicine, only worse Geoff said, "You don't have to pretend to like it. After a bit you'll sort of get used to it."

Some nights they were engaged in darker work. They would drive the car to a rendezvous, which was usually a garage in the docks area. Men would be there, shadowy figures who hardly showed their faces. Crates which seemed to weigh heavily would be loaded onto the back seat of the car. The boys then drove out into the Kent countryside. The men never came with them. When they arrived at their destination, sometimes another garage, sometimes a small workshop or factory, the cargo was unloaded with equal speed and silence and a wad of notes was pushed into Len's hands.

The only real difference of opinion the boys ever had was over the money. Len and Geoff wanted to share everything equally. Timothy agreed to keep some of it, but refused any idea of equal sharing. First, because he wouldn't have known what to do with so much cash. More important, because he knew what it was being saved up for. One of the pictures on the wall of their den was a blown-up photograph of a motorbicycle. A Norton Interstate 850 Road Racer.

"Do a ton easy," said Len. "Hundred and thirty on the track. Old Edelman at that garage we go to down the docks says he can get me one at trade prices. How much are we up to?"

As he said this he was prising up a board in the corner. Under the board was a biscuit tin, the edges sealed with insulating tape. In the tin was the pirates' hoard of notes and coins.

"Another tenner and we're there," said Geoff.

TIMOTHY STILL went to choir practice. If he had missed it his absence would have been noticed, and inquiries would have followed. The Reverend Amberline usually put in an appearance, to preserve law and order and on this occasion he happened to notice Timothy.

They were practising the hymn from the Yattenden hymnal, *O quam juvat fratres*. "Happy are they, they that love God" The rector thought that Timothy, normally a reserved and rather silent boy, really did look happy. He was bubbling over, bursting with happiness. "Remember now thy Creator," said the Reverend Amberline sadly to himself, "in the days of thy youth" How splendid to be young and happy

THAT EVENING, Detective Chief Inspector Patrick Petrella paid a visit to Mr. Grant's house in Dodman Street. He said, "We've had a number of reports of cars being taken away without their owner's consent."

"That's right," said Mr. Grant. "And I'm glad you're going

to do something about it at last. My neighbour, Mr. Knowlson, lost his a few weeks ago. He got it back, but it was in a shocking state."

"Yesterday evening," said Petrella, "the boys who seem to have been responsible for a number of these cases were observed. If the person who observed them had been a bit quicker, they'd have been apprehended. But she did give us a positive identification of one lad she recognized. It was your son, Timothy."

"I don't believe it," said Mr. Grant, as soon as he had got his breath back. "Timothy would never do anything like that. He's a thoroughly nice boy."

"Can you tell me where he was yesterday evening?"

"Certainly I can. He was with the Voluntary Service Organization."

"The people at Craythorne Hall?"

"That's right."

"May I use your telephone?"

"Yes. And then I hope you'll apologize."

Three minutes later Petrella said, "Not only was he not at Craythorne Hall on Wednesday evening, but he's never been there. They know nothing about him. They say they only take on boys of seventeen and over."

Mr. Grant stared at him, white-faced.

"Where is he now?"

"At choir practice."

"Choir practice would have been over by half past eight."

"He goes on afterwards to the youth club."

Petrella knew the missioner at the youth club and used the telephone again. By this time Mrs. Grant had joined them. Petrella faced a badly shaken couple. He said, "I'd like to have a word with Timothy when he does get back. It doesn't matter how late it is. I've got something on at the Station which is going to keep me there anyway."

He gave them his number at Patton Street

The matter which Petrella referred to was a report of goods, stolen from the railway yard, being run to a certain garage in the docks area.

It was out of this garage, at the moment that Petrella left Dodman Street, that the brand new, shining monster was being wheeled.

"She's licensed and we've filled her up for you," said Mr. Edelman, who was the jovial proprietor of the garage. "You can have that on the house." He could afford to be generous. The courier service which the boys had run for him had enriched him at minimal risk to himself.

"Well, thanks," said Geoff. He was almost speechless with pride and excitement.

"If you want to try her out, the best way is over Blackheath and out onto the M2. You can let her rip there."

Geoff and Len were both wearing new white helmets, white silk scarves wrapped round the lower parts of their faces, black leather coats and leather gauntlets. The gloves, helmets and scarves had been lifted the day before from an outfitters in Southwark High Street. The coats had been bought for them by Timothy out of his share of the money. Len was the driver. Geoff was to ride pillion

"Your turn tomorrow," said Geoff

"Fine," said Timothy. "I'll wait for you at our place."

"Keep the home fires burning," said Len "This is just a trial run. We'll be back in an hour."

"And watch it," said Mr. Edelman. "There's a lot of horsepower inside that little beauty. So don't go doing anything bloody stupid."

His words were drowned in the roar of the Road Racer starting up

Timothy stood listening until he could hear it no longer, and then turned and walked away.

PETRELLA GOT the news at eleven o'clock that night.

"We've identified the boys," said the voice on the telephone "They both lived in your area. Cowell and Rhodes. I can give you the addresses."

"Both dead?"

"They could hardly be deader. They went off the road and smashed into the back of a parked lorry. An AA patrol saw it happen. Said they must have been doing over ninety. Stupid young buggers."

The speaker sounded angry. But he had seen the bodies and had sons of his own.

The Cowells' house was the nearest and Petrella called there first. He found Mr and Mrs Cowell in the kitchen, with the television blaring. They turned it off when they understood what Petrella was telling them.

"I warned him," said Mr. Cowell. "You heard me tell him."

"You said what nasty dangerous things they were," agreed his wife. "We didn't even know he had one."

"It was a brand new machine," said Petrella. "Any idea where he might have got it from?"

"Tell you the truth," said Mr. Cowell, "we haven't been seeing a lot of Geoff lately. Boys at that age run wild, you know."

"We've brought up six," said Mrs Cowell, and started to cry softly.

Mr. Cowell said, "He and Len were good boys really. It was that Ronnie Silverlight led them astray. Until they ganged up with him we never had no trouble. No trouble at all."

IT WAS ONE O'CLOCK in the morning by the time Petrella got back to Patton Street. The desk sergeant said that there had been a number of calls. A Mr. Grant had rung more than once. And a boy who said he was Len Rhodes's brother was asking for news."

"How long ago was that?"

"About ten minutes ago."

"That's funny," said Petrella. "I've just come from the Rhodes'. And I don't think Len had a brother. What did you tell him?"

"I just gave him the news."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He just rang off. I think he was speaking from a call box."

At this moment the telephone on the desk rang again. It was Mr. Grant. His voice was ragged with worry. "It's Timothy," he said. "He's not come home. You haven't —"

"No," said Petrella, "we haven't got him here. Is there anywhere else he might have gone? Had he got any friends?"

"We don't know anyone round here. He wouldn't just have walked out without saying anything. His mother's beside herself. She wanted to come round and see you."

"I don't think that would do any good," said Petrella. "We'll do what we can." He thought about it and then said to the desk sergeant, "Can you turn up the record and find out what happened to a boy called Ronald Silverlight. He was sent down for petty larceny, about two months ago. One of the Borstal institutes. See if you can find me the warden's telephone number."

In spite of being hauled from his bed the warden, once he understood what Petrella wanted, was sympathetic and co-operative. He said, "It's a long shot, but I'll wake Ronnie up and ring you back if I get anything."

Ten minutes later he came through again. He said, "This might be what you want. I gather they were using some derelict old building down in the docks area. It wouldn't be easy to explain. The best plan will be to send the boy up in a car. It'll take an hour or more."

"I'll wait," said Petrella.

It was nearly four o'clock before the car arrived, with a police driver and Ronnie Silverlight and a warder in the back. Petrella

got in with them and they drove down, through the empty streets, towards the river.

"You have to walk the last bit," said Ronnie.

Petrella thought about it. There seemed to be too many of them. He said, "I'll be responsible for the boy. You two wait here."

When they got to the building Ronnie said, "We used to shift the bottom board, see, and get in underneath. It'll be a tight squeeze for you."

"I'll manage," said Petrella.

He did it by lying on his back and using his elbows. When he was inside he clicked on the torch he had brought with him.

"Up there," said Ronnie. He was speaking in a whisper and didn't seem anxious to go first, so Petrella led the way up.

When he opened the door the first thing that caught his eye was a glow from a fire of driftwood in the hearth which had burned down to red embers. Then, as his torch swung upwards, the white beam of light showed him Timothy. He had climbed onto the table, tied one end of a rope to the beam, fixed the other in a noose round his neck, and kicked away the plank.

Petrella put the plank back and jumped up beside him, but as soon as he touched the boy he knew that they were much too late. He had been dead for hours.

He must have done it, thought Petrella, soon after he had telephoned the Station and heard the news. And he made up the fire to give him some heat and light to see what he was doing.

"It's Timmy Grant, isn't it?," said Ronnie. He sounded more excited than shocked.

"Yes," said Petrella. "It's Timmy." He was thinking of all the things he would now have to do, starting with the breaking of the news to his parents.

"He was a good kid," said Ronnie. "Geoff wrote to me about him."

Petrella's torch picked up a flash of white. It was a piece of

paper which had fallen off the table. On it was written, in Timothy's schoolboy script, two lines. Petrella recognized them as coming from a hymn, but he did not know, until Father Amberline told him long afterwards, that they were from the hymn that the choir had been singing that evening.

And death itself shall not unbind
Their happy brotherhood.

Petrella folded it up, and slipped it quickly into his pocket. It was against all his instincts as a policeman to suppress evidence, but he felt that it would be brutal to show it to Mr. and Mrs. Grant.

Commander Gideon in

THE MAN WHO LOVED CARS

by J.J. Marric



ONE OF THE most common crimes in the City of London, in fact in practically all big cities in the world, is car-stealing. Many hundreds of cars are stolen every week in London, most of them new, and of a popular make, so that they can be sold easily.

The thieves, often working in highly organized gangs, have a number of tricks to help them get the "hot" cars off their hands. But these tricks are well known to the police. If the engine number of a car has been filed off the casing, infra-red rays can still reveal this number. If the car has been resprayed, it is easy to check how long the cellulose has been dry, and what colour is underneath. For every car thief's trick, there is a police counter-measure.

All this was known, as second nature, to Commander George Gideon of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Metropolitan Police. But Gideon seldom gave car thieves much thought, unless they reached a new high level, or unless they failed to fit into the normal pattern.

He was a big, powerful, rugged man, with iron grey hair, and as he entered the N.E. Divisional Police Headquarters one hazy autumn morning, the boards groaning under his deliberate tread, every man sprang to attention.

This time it was the divisional superintendent who committed a crime. He kept George Gideon waiting. Everyone in

the station was on edge about this, except Gideon himself, who stood by the superintendent's window, looking out onto the station yard. Among the police cars was an old black Bugatti, a vintage model, beautifully painted, all its brasswork polished and gleaming

The superintendent, a tall, thin man, came in. "Sorry, Commander. I've been down in the cells, talking to a fellow who all but strangled his wife last night."

"How does he feel about it now?" asked Gideon

The superintendent grinned. "He says he'll never forgive himself for not having finished her off!"

"The longer he cools his heels, the better," said Gideon "Anything much in, otherwise?"

"No. What's brought you?"

"Just come to keep you on your toes," said Gideon, dryly. "What's that old crock doing in the yard?"

"We picked it up this morning. It was reported stolen six months ago. Remember?"

Gideon did not remember, but did not say so. He could recall reading of the theft and recovery of other vintage motorcars, however, from wire-wheeled Bentleys to Model-T Fords, but this particular series of crimes had been so insignificant that he had taken little notice of it. Now, his mind began to roam.

"Get the thief?" he inquired.

"Not yet."

"Where was it?"

"In an old warehouse near the docks. We were looking for that load of cigarettes taken from Hyne's Wharf last night, and doing a routine check of all the places where it might be."

"Who gave the car the spit and polish?"

"Well, the owner obviously didn't—and *we* didn't—so I suppose it must have been the fellow who pinched it."

"Bit peculiar," said Gideon thoughtfully. "I'd like to have a look in the warehouse. Can you spare the time?"

"For you, yes. For anyone else, I'm working too hard as it is."

"Poor old chap," scoffed Gideon.

Half an hour later, he was standing in the warehouse, gazing round at the high rafters, the holes in the roof where slates had fallen, the high loading platform, the dusty floor. As the sun's rays filtered through the long window, lighting that corner of the warehouse where the vintage car had stood, his keen gaze fell on some pale flecks of congealed liquid. He bent down, touched one, and sniffed at his finger.

"Metal polish," he remarked.

"Yes, the thief worked on it all right, and he worked on it here," the superintendent said. "Come and see this." Gideon followed him to the loading bay, where he found the superintendent leaning over a big cardboard box, which contained polishing cloths, a jam jar with several paint brushes, a tin of black enamel paint, a cleaning powder, and various odd bottles and cartons.

"We must try these for fingerprints," said Gideon. "Any prints on the car?"

"Plenty, but we haven't got them in Records."

"What have you done about it?"

"Sent a report—Colonel Riordon, the owner, is due to come and identify his property some time today. But why are you so interested, Commander?—it's a straightforward job. These old cars are worth a lot of money, they're kept in museums and private collections all over the country, and the more spit and polish, the more valuable they are. It's as simple as that."

"—Mm," grunted Gideon. "Ask the owner if he could spare time to come and see me at the Yard, will you?"

"Don't tell me you see some major crime lurking behind this," said the superintendent. "It's just a new form of the old game." When Gideon didn't respond, he went on: "I'll give Colonel Riordon your message."

At half-past three that afternoon, the old and tired building of

the former New Scotland Yard was brightened by a boisterous, even flamboyant individual in a check tweed suit and an RAC Veterans tie.

"My name's Riordon, Colonel Riordon," he boomed in the hushed hall. "I believe you've a Commander Gideon here. He wants to see me."

Very soon Colonel Riordon had boomed his way into Gideon's office.

"Want to say thank you. Wonderful chaps, you police. Didn't think I'd ever see that car again. Congratulations. How much do I have to pay?"

"Pay for what?" asked Gideon, a little overwhelmed

"Reward, sir, reward! For getting the car back."

"You settle that when you pay your taxes," Gideon said. "Have you heard about the other old cars that have been stolen recently?"

"I certainly have!"

"Do you collect vintage cars?" asked Gideon.

"Have done for years. Some people collect stamps, some collect jade, some collect paperweights. I collect old cars. Got fifty-three of them. Keep them on show mostly, but I always like to drive a different one each week. Shock of my life when this one disappeared."

"Have you had any others stolen?"

"Any *others*?" Colonel Riordon looked alarmed.

"Have you bought any of the stolen ones?" asked Gideon, with deceptive mildness.

Colonel Riordon gaped.

"*Bought* them? Stolen cars? Good God, Commander, you must be mad!"

Gideon raised a soothing hand. "Can you think of any collector who would buy a car, knowing it to be stolen?"

Colonel Riorden's eyes gleamed with excitement. He leaned forward.

"I see. Like an art-lover might buy a stolen painting, you mean. Buy it, knowing that he would have to keep it hidden, and that only he could enjoy it. Well, such connoisseurs may exist, but not in this line of business, Commander. The whole fun of owning an old crock is showing it off to the other fellow. There's no undercover buying in the vintage car market, you can take it from me."

"If you're quite sure—"

"Take it from me," repeated Colonel Riordon. "It's like a club, Commander. If anyone pinches a car of mine, all the others in the game feel as if they've lost a friend, too. There aren't any exceptions. And I know every owner, Commander, every collector."

"Who cleans and polishes these old cars?" asked Gideon.

"The owners, as likely as not—or their mechanics. But owner or mechanic, they all have the same sense of pride in looking after the cars. They treat them as if they were living creatures, and that's the truth of it. Cleaning and polishing is a labour of love."

Gideon looked deceptively innocent. "And what do you think of the condition of your Bugattu, Colonel?"

"Never seen it better!"

"A labour of love, perhaps," said Gideon softly.

"Absolutely, Commander! No doubt about it. A great deal of elbow grease and loving care went into maintaining the appearance of that car."

"So the thief must also have that sense of pride you were telling me about," murmured Gideon.

"What's that? Oh!" Colonel Riordon looked thoughtful. "I see what you mean. Couldn't have been stolen for resale, certainly couldn't have been driven about by the thief, he had to hide it somewhere and keep it to himself—by Jove! Undercover—just the kind of man I said we didn't know in the old crocks game. You've made your point!"

"There have been nine cases of vintage cars being stolen," began Gideon. "And—"

"Every one recovered in first-class condition!"

"That is so," agreed Gideon. "Now—no one who could afford to buy them would be likely to steal them, would they?"

"Deuced unlikely," Colonel Riordon agreed.

"And according to the reports, no two have been stolen in the same period. So, assuming each to have been taken by the same person, the thief steals one, hides it, and cares for it. Only after it has been recovered does he steal another. So it looks as if his only object is to have a car—*any* car, providing it's vintage—that he can care for."

"Like these women who steal other women's babies!"

"Well, perhaps," agreed Gideon. "So we're looking for a man who loves vintage cars, but can't afford to buy them. He must be a bit of a crank, of course."

Colonel Riordon was staring at him very intently.

"Do you know of such a man?" asked Gideon flatly.

There was a moment's pause.

"No," said Colonel Riordon, sharply. "No, sir, I do not."

He rose from his chair, as if anxious to be gone.

"I'll be grateful if you'll let me know if you hear of one," Gideon told him. "He'll probably be the man we want."

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Riordon, almost impatiently. "I'll let you know, Commander."

"And one of these days I'd like to look over your museum," said Gideon, following him to the door.

The Colonel turned.

"And so you shall, Commander, so you shall. I'll send you an invitation. Goodbye for now, sir. I hope you soon get your man."

But the police did not get their man, and in the next three months the investigation petered out, partly because of more urgent cases, partly because no more vintage cars were stolen.

Early in the fourth month, Gideon received an invitation to visit Colonel Riordon's Old Crock Museum, in a Surrey country town.

"And now for the moment of truth!" boomed Colonel Riordon, turning to Gideon after an excellent luncheon. "You are about to see the finest collection of old crocks in the western world!"

The collection certainly seemed to measure up to his boast. Benz, Bentley, Hispano-Suiza, Buesenberg, there they were, vintage cars of all shapes, sizes and makes. And each one shone. Brasswork, coachwork, chassis, wheels, engine, radiator, upholstery—outside and in, everything was bright and gleaming.

Acting as their guide was a man in the early forties, whose eyes glowed, whose voice was eager, as he described the history, the virtues, of every car.

"Amazing chap," Colonel Riordon said to Gideon, an hour or so later, as they walked back towards the house. "He's done practically all the work himself. Dotes on it. Bit peculiar in some ways, almost simple, you might say. But old crocks are everything to him. I hired him as an odd job man, actually—didn't trust him with the cars to start with, though he begged me to let him look after them. Used to polish most of them myself. But when I got the Bugatti back—and after our little talk, Commander—" Colonel Riordon paused, looking sharply at Gideon, who said nothing. "—I let him take over completely. It's come off so far. Works his fingers to the bone."

"You're lucky to have such a man," Gideon said solemnly.

"I am indeed. By the way, Commander, did you ever catch the fellow we were talking about that day?"

There was a hint of laughter in the Colonel's eyes.

"No," said Gideon. "He's stopped operating. He's probably found the job he was looking for," he added mildly.

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